

[By Neal Goswami, Brattleboro Reformer](#)

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch says the Senate's version of health care reform, set for a final vote today, lacks three key principals that should be addressed when the House and Senate attempt to merge the two differing bills.

Senate leaders successfully cobbled together the 60 votes needed to defeat a Republican filibuster. But several key provisions favored by liberals were dropped to accommodate more conservative members of the Democratic Party, including a government-run public insurance option contained in the House version of health care reform.

All 40 Republican senators have been unified in their opposition to the Senate bill.

Welch, a Democrat, said a public option, or a stipulation allowing for the expansion of the senior health plan to cover younger Americans through a buy-in, should find its way into a final bill crafted by House and Senate negotiators.

"We lost a lot in the Senate bill, and we've got to fight for its restoration in conference," Welch said in a telephone interview Wednesday.

Welch said the final bill should also contain tougher negotiations for prescription drugs and a repeal of the anti-trust exemption for the health insurance industry, both of which are contained in the House bill but were not included in the Senate version.

"Those are significant losses, and frankly, make the bill more expensive than it needs to be and give consumers less choices than they're entitled to have," Welch said.

There are provisions in the Senate bill that House Democrats will find appealing, Welch said.

Among them, he said, are barring insurance companies from rejecting consumers for pre-existing medical conditions, allowing children to remain on their parents' coverage until age 27 and expanding coverage to an additional 30 million Americans.

"That's what (Sen. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt.) and (Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.) were fighting hard to maintain," Welch said. "They have to deal with that weird 60-vote rule.

Senate rules require 60 votes to invoke cloture and proceed to a final vote.

Welch said he is not willing to say whether or not he will vote for a final bill based on whether specific provisions are included or not.

Doing so, he said, will limit his leverage and capacity to strengthen the final bill.

"My job will be to decide yes or no on the final vote on the final version of the bill," Welch said. "As we get into conference we'll have a chance to fight another day and I look forward to doing that. We're only in the seventh inning."

Some senators have prominently stood in the way of a public option or an expansion of Medicare, including independent Connecticut Sen. Joseph Lieberman. Welch said Wednesday that Lieberman has "totally discredited himself" on the issue. "Keep in mind, there are more than 50 votes in the Senate that want a public option. It's this bizarre 60-vote rule," he said.

Welch said it is his sense that the House will want the public option included in a final bill. "That's going to be the real debate that we have, but it's premature," he said. "There's a strong view in the House that we have to give people the choice of a public option."

Welch said he will be coordinating strategies with Leahy and Sanders to push for provisions they favor. "Bernie, Patrick and I are pretty much on the same page," he said.

Welch said he remains confident that lawmakers will succeed in passing health care reform that benefits Americans.

"There is a strong desire to succeed and an understanding that failure would have very significant consequences," Welch said.